

River Experience:
A Phenomenological Description of Meaningful
Experiences on a Wilderness River Journey

by

Marcus Morse

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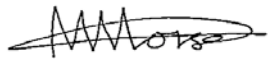
School of Geography and Environmental Studies

University of Tasmania

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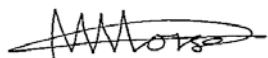


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Abstract

Outdoor educators, nature-based tourism guides and private recreationalists make use of wilderness river areas for extended journeys. The justification for running such trips commonly involves the potential ‘experience’ that it affords participants. Yet the experiences themselves are often unique, individual and difficult to describe. While ‘the experience’ is commonly used as a justification for such journeys, experience itself does not always appear to be well understood or easily articulated.

This research project explores participant descriptions of meaningful experiences on a wilderness river journey, in order to answer the questions ‘what forms of meaningful experiences might occur on a wilderness river journey?’, ‘what components of the journey facilitate those meaningful experiences?’, ‘what is the role of the wilderness landscape itself in facilitating those experiences?’, and ‘what is the potential value of meaningful wilderness experiences subsequent upon returning to everyday life?’. The research uses a phenomenological approach to elucidate individual perceptions of meaningful experiences, and then combines the recollections to reveal the commonalities within those experiences. Using interviews, journals, observations and follow-up emails from 32 participants on eight Franklin River (ten day) trips, the project moves from the individual to the collective, to identify and describe the qualities and essences of meaningful experiences on a wilderness river journey.

The research identifies two recurrent key ‘streams of experience’. These involve *a feeling of humility* and *being alive to the present*. By interrogating the thematic structure of participant descriptions surrounding these two streams of experience, invariant structures are revealed. These invariant structures further provide the opportunity to refocus on individual participant descriptions, and illuminate the essential qualities of the phenomena described.

It is argued that by understanding potentially meaningful experiences on a wilderness river journey, outdoor educators, commercial guides and facilitators will be better

able to make use of surrounding environs to facilitate such experiences. There is a focus on the unique elements of the wilderness river journey that, in this research, contributed to the unique experiences which participants valued as meaningful.

Acknowledgements

This research project has proven more difficult than I had, at the outset, innocently imagined. It has caused me to ask questions not only of my own understanding and experience of wilderness river journeys, but also of myself. Without the encouragement and support of those around me, this would not have been possible.

I owe most to my partner Pip, whose belief, realism, encouragement, support, humour and love throughout provided me the opportunity to undertake this journey. There is no one with whom I would rather be on the river. Immeasurable thanks also to my supervisor, Dr Peter Hay, for the gifts of supervision, encouragement, belief and friendship throughout, and an appreciation of times both on and off the river.

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